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“Fly Me to the Moon... No?” The Effect of NASA’s Budget Cut on U.S. Soft Power ^[1]

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On February 1, President Barack Obama released his \$3.8 trillion Federal Budget, which has been criticized for driving record deficits even higher. One agency not receiving extra spending from Obama’s plan, though, is America’s space agency, as NASA’s budget  has been cut; (in theory, it’s increased from the previous year, but in practice it’s lower). Huh?

Much has already been reported about the operational effect of Obama’s plan, notably the cancellation of NASA’s Constellation Program, but very little has been written to date about the political consequences.

On January 14, 2004, President George W. Bush’s administration articulated a new vision  for space exploration which appeared to be the practical follow-up to an uncharacteristically poetic quote from 2003: “This cause for exploration and discovery is not an option we choose; it is a desire written in the human heart.” The manifestation of this vision was NASA’s Constellation Program – a human spaceflight program to replace the imminently retiring Space Shuttle with ambitions to return to the Moon and to send humans to Mars.

In brief, the Constellation Program involves the development of Orion – the next-generation crew exploration vehicle – that would be launched into low Earth orbit (LEO) by the new Ares I rocket. Once in LEO, Orion would rendezvous with the Ares V rocket and Altair (the new lunar lander module) in the Earth Departure Stage (EDS). The EDS will take Orion into lunar orbit and the crew will descend from there to the surface of the Moon in Altair. And then return at some point, presumably. The Mars vision is obviously built into the program given that ‘Ares’ was the Greek God of War whose Roman equivalent was, of course, Mars.

Instead of this visionary exploration, however, NASA is now charged with facilitating the growth of the commercial space industry and pursuing the development of technologies that would make space travel more affordable. Members of Congress, on both sides, have criticized Obama’s plan, with Sen. Richard C. Shelby (R-Ala.) saying, for example, that, “NASA will no longer be an agency of innovation and hard science. It will be the agency of pipe dreams and fairy tales.” But no-one has yet asked the question, “What are the consequences of that image of NASA?”

NASA was created in 1958 in response to the Sputnik Crisis, which was the perceived threat to America’s security and technological leadership resulting from the Soviet Union’s 1957 launch of Sputnik 1, the world’s first man-made satellite. So began the Space Race – the ultimate Cold War battle for technological supremacy. The United States eventually won the Space Race in 1969 by landing Apollo 11’s Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin, and Michael Collins on the Moon. This unprecedented feat of human achievement consolidated America’s

technological superiority which it retained through to the end of the Cold War, and arguably ever since.

There is no doubt that this technological leadership, with its associations of enterprise and innovation, has been a positive aspect – perhaps the most consistent positive aspect – of America’s image to the world. America’s image suffered during the latest Bush years, 2001-2009, mainly as a result of its foreign policy. But it regained ground with the election of Barack Obama. It is ironic, therefore, that Obama appears to be dealing a lethal blow to that positive aspect (even more ironic that Bush was the most recent space visionary). One defence of Obama’s position could be that, by supporting the private space industry, he is encouraging enterprise and innovation in a ‘truly American’ egalitarian way.

Obama is missing the point, though. A nation’s image is built more on what the state itself achieves than what its private individuals do (a state is not just the sum of its individuals). Most of the nation’s citizens, who may never make it into space themselves, would prefer the administration that they elected to lead the way to the stars rather than the businessman next door who happens to have a spare billion dollars.

So, in effect, not only is Obama disabling NASA, he is undermining a cornerstone of his country’s soft power. Furthermore, he is handing the initiative to other states that are quietly (or not) developing their own space programs apace. China is shooting for the Moon. India has made breakthrough discoveries in lunar exploration. Even North Korea and Iran are launching rockets regularly.

On his November 2009 visit to Beijing, Obama talked about co-operation rather than competition with China in space. The new budget now makes co-operation the only option for the U.S., besides ceding the frontier of space to China altogether. But we all know that it is competition that facilitates creativity (in spite of those who would argue the opposite). In any case, America has lost the initiative.

What the U.S. needs is another Cold War Space Race – some focus, some drive, some competitive spirit – but instead it has relegated itself to the sidelines. The only way that the U.S. government can demonstrate technological superiority now is through its military; (computing, Internet, and other technology-based fields are already outsourced to private industry).

The military, of course, is the very opposite of soft power, so Obama has effectively robbed himself of attractive diplomatic currency. But even on the hard power front, the U.S. may also lose out if China chooses to militarize space in spite of the U.N.’s Outer Space Treaty. The U.S. could only militate against that scenario if it had its own independent presence in space. But that presence, for the time being, will have to remain a pipe dream.

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